

Military Experience – Poetry

The Price of War

By Embree Bolton



"Last year...senior prom; this year...Vietnam."

Carved in the outhouse wall,
A subtle reminder to one and all
That this is **the price of war.**

Thousands killed—crippling wounds.
PTSD, tears and depression.
Gold Star families; suicides rampant;
The price of war.

Lessons learned? Hopefully, so—
That war is a form of oppression.
Graves cry out, "Go home!"
This is **the price of war.**

Once the war has started,
How and when will it end?
Will our leaders "step up to the plate"
And say, "Never again?"

Decades later, looking back—
At the lives that were ruined.
Is history repeating itself today?
The price of war—never learned!

The Miracle

By Beverly Smith Tillery

The soldier that they brought to me
Should probably have lost his legs,
But the decision had been made
To save them no matter the cost.
And so I put him off to sleep,
The surgeons worked for hours on end.
They finally stepped back and said,
"This is all that we'll do today."
He was a young Army soldier,
In Germany with wife and child,
But then he was sent to Iraq,
An IED had been his fate.
I saw him many times when I
Put him to sleep to save his legs,
And we became the best of friends,
I met his wife and held his child.
And in the pharmacy one day,
I saw him there in his wheelchair.
He said, "Ma'am, you'll be first to see
Me take a step all on my own."
I held my breath as he stood up



And slowly took three steps to me.
His little boy just laughed and clapped,
And I thought I should do the same.
And as I clapped, my tears ran down,
The joy of knowing after months,
The young man took his legs with him.
Small miracles have happened there,
Within the four walls of Landstuhl,
I know because I witnessed one.

Military Experience – Not Poetry

The Magic of Christmas

By Steve Banko

For me, the magic of Christmas starts with music. From those long-ago days of grammar school innocence when the nuns drilled the words of every carol in Christendom into my brain, until today, with innocence a faded memory but the joy of Christmas a constant prayer, I found great delight and consolation in the music of Christmas. Some of my most enduring memories involve those nuns, the songs they taught me, and the way we sang them. It hardly mattered that puberty rendered the male voices in our choir more akin to a pond of bullfrogs than the Vienna Boys Choir. The real magic wasn't in our voices. It was in the words – in the hope and the promise and of Christmas.



Less than a decade later and a half-world away from grade school and light-years away from the simple joy of ice cream and Mothers' Club cookies, I spent a different kind of Christmas under the spell of the carols.

On 3 December 1968, my rifle company was mauled by North Vietnamese soldiers in a nameless clearing in the jungle near the Cambodian border. We fought for more than five hours against repeated ground attacks against our perimeter but when the shooting stopped, our company endured more than 85% casualties. I was one of the "lucky" ones who survived that horrible day. I'd been shot twice but both bullets hit my right leg. The second shot destroyed my kneecap and forced me to use elephant grass to stanch the bleeding. My hands were burned and I had a dozen or so pieces of mortar shrapnel in various parts of my body. But unlike so many of the men I led into that battle, I was alive.

I spent three delirious weeks with an infection raging and a fever wracking my body. The doctors told me I'd be going to Japan to let another team try to stem the tide of the infection. The nurses I'd encountered in Vietnam became more than nurses and more like friends during those three weeks. Christmas would be spent far from home but not far from friendly faces.

But December 24th is just another day in the Army. That morning I was hustled out of the hospital and sent off to Japan.

I arrived at Yokota Air Force Base outside Tokyo late on Christmas Eve. The friendly faces of nurses I'd come to know were replaced with strange faces in a strange setting. My body hurt but my mind was worse off. I was frightened by what this pain might mean for my future. I was angry for what my country made me do and endure in its name. But more than anything, I was lonely. Christmas was always something to be shared and now, I was alone in the bleakest sense of the word. My only consolation came from the sound system piping music through our ward.

"The First Noel" ... "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" ... "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing" ... by the time the carols recycled for another rotation, I could almost believe there was joy in the world,

somewhere. No matter how close I came to believing though, the pain in my knee and the sadness in my mind mired me in despair.

I was interrupted in my self-pity by a low moan from the bed next to me. So had I been so self-absorbed that I was oblivious to those around me. The sound awakened me to the sad fact I was not alone in my suffering.

In fact, the man in the next bed was much worse off. He was covered in plaster from the tops of his knees to his lower jaw. Gauze covered his face and head with cutouts for his eyes, nose, and mouth broke the field of white. His arms were plastered and held away from his body with metal rods. His hands were the only skin not covered.

The music of hope and love and triumph were frequently punctuated by the sounds of pain. Throughout, however, the man in the cast could issue only low moans. I couldn't conceive of what unspeakable horror had left him like this; what terrible pain plagued his body; what hopes and dreams had been crushed by the brutality that rendered him so helpless.

My pain didn't seem important and my loneliness became tolerable. When the nurse came with our pain meds and the lights dimmed, the strains of "Silent Night" were my last recollections of that sad, strange Christmas Eve. Before I nodded off, I asked the nurse to push my bed closer to the man in the cast. I reached out and touched my comrade's hand. Finally, it did seem as though "all was calm, all was bright."

No words were spoken. None were needed. I felt a gentle tightening on my hand and for the first time that December, I believed that I might survive, and first the first in weeks, I wanted to.

The magic of Christmas is in the music.

Special Recognition

The End of War in Afghanistan

By Beverly Smith Tillery

I heard it on the news today,
That finally we're coming home.
The war I fought for six long years
Is coming to its final end.
What did we gain in that sad place,
In desert plain and mountain pass?
We'd gain one step on Taliban
And then be pushed back twenty more.
We fought to make a better life
For all the children in that land,
But I feel that the day we're gone,
The things we built will tumble down.
I think of all the wounded ones,
The injured from Afghanistan,
Who came on planes to Germany,
The ones I tried and couldn't save.
The war there took a crushing toll,
Thousands of soldiers we watched die,
The wounded ones that we sent home,
And those who suffer just like me,
Who cannot leave the war behind.



At night I dream the planes come in,
Loaded with injured from the war,
I dream I work in the OR,
To save the ones already lost,
And after twenty years I think,
What did we gain? What was the cost?

Art: The Light Inside

By Lisa Torres



If I had a dollar for every time I was told to move into the light, be more present and be this, and be that I'd rent or open an art gallery. Those catch phrases always sounded judgmental to me and still do. For years, I went to therapy and each time I left I felt depressed. Not worthy with no purpose. I was in pain both physically and mentally and I simply went through the motions attending these sterile appointments. Deep inside I knew there was much more for me to do, to give, to teach, and to receive.

One day a long-time friend invited me out for lunch. We hadn't seen each other in a few years because she was fighting her own demons. So, when she reached out, I was in desperate need of some social interaction outside of my home and to be face to face. We made a time and place to meet up and I started to look forward to it. The anxiety of going to a public place, having been M.I.A. for years, started to rise.

The day came and I woke with all kind of excuses as to why I was unable to make it. I told myself excuse after excuse, until she texted "Are we still on?". I replied yes. I wanted to support my friend and veteran sister at arms, feeling in some way that if I give, I will get. Not material gifts but spiritual which I was looking for. I threw on my beach shorts, a t-shirt and flops and headed out.

It had been literally years since meeting a friend for lunch. Anxiety overwhelmed me as I drove to the restaurant. When I arrived, it was early, and we had the pick of tables on the outdoor patio. We sat down and she started to talk about how well things were going in her life. After joining a group at the Bay Pines facility, she had started writing again and was socializing with other veterans. She was smiling a genuinely happy smile. Well, why haven't I heard about this was my immediate question, but I listened first. I could tell this was amazing. It was quite obvious that her life was becoming more fulfilling, and I wanted to be a part of that group.

I joined. Honestly, I didn't take to the whole group thing immediately. I found myself saying the most negative things. But I continued to go and found less things to say negatively after the Creative Writing Group. Writing out my thoughts has always been something I enjoyed, but being consistent was the challenge. Every week we listened to a poem or short story. Talk and write on the prompt. The words were not flowing too easily at first. Everything was short and to the point. Interesting but boring. Was my life that boring?

Painting, drawing and clay groups combined with the creative writing and suddenly I found myself waking up from this place I was suspended in. I really felt heaviness dropping off me. Even now, sometimes I cannot sleep because I am thinking about writing something or drawing or coloring with these amazing color pencils. PRRC, the art groups and community support for the arts should be an integral part of all veterans in recovery. Art stimulates the brain which gives a sense of awareness to the body and literally wakes one up from the inside. Art becomes the drug of choice.

Having art and access to art has helped me heal. I feel things and I see things for the first time in so long. When art is being created or admired, the mind can't help but let go of the noise. I am forever grateful for PRRC and the recreation therapy creative arts department. Today, almost two years later, I am going to museums, I am creating, am more physically fit and social than I've been in a very long time. I did receive a gift after all. Art is truly the light inside.